



# EXCEEDING THE EXPECTATION

*The VA Network 2 Approach to Exceeding Customer Service • Issue 4, Autumn 1999*

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## Reducing Waits and Delays in VA Clinics

*By Fabiane Erb, WNYHS*

We are pleased to announce that VA Western New York Healthcare System is participating in a national VA project to reduce waiting times and delays in our VA outpatient clinics. The project is being done in partnership with the Institute for Healthcare Improvement (IHI) in a method called a "Collaborative".

The Institute for Healthcare Improvement is a Boston-based, independent, non-profit organization working since 1991 to accelerate improvement in healthcare systems in the United States, Canada and Europe, by fostering collaboration, rather than competition, among healthcare organizations. Specific goals that IHI works toward include:

- Improved health status
- Better clinical outcomes
- Reduced costs that do not compromise quality
- Greater access to care
- An easier-to-use healthcare system
- Improved satisfaction for patients and communities

Our health system is plagued by delays and long cycle times. Examples include: delays to get an appointment with a primary care physician or a specialist; extended waits when placed on hold;

repeated phone calls to obtain a test result or to have questions answered by a provider; wait times over an hour to see a physician for a scheduled appointment. These delays adversely affect clinical outcomes, patient satisfaction, and costs, often impacting on an organization's ability to attract and retain patients. People often assume that reducing delays and increasing access will increase cost. In fact the opposite is true: delays and restricted access are properties of poorly-designed, costly systems.

This Collaborative aims to reduce delays and cycle times on the order of 50% in focused parts of the system across all VA sites. Based on the Institute for Healthcare Improvement's experiences in previous Collaboratives, we also expect that some of the sites

will reach leading edge levels of performance, such as same-day availability of appointments for a physical or other routine appointment.

We have already begun the work for participation in the Collaborative. Through tests of process improvement changes, feedback, coaching from IHI, and learning from other site's experiences, our team will make positive changes over the next several months, to reduce waits and delays in our VA outpatient clinics. The team will keep us updated on their progress and we hope to be able to apply their successful changes to other areas of our healthcare system. If you have questions about the Collaborative, please contact one of your local team members, or the Network 2 point of contact, Ms. Fabiane Erb, at (716) 862-8530, or via e-mail on MS Outlook.

Contact members from each of the Network 2 teams include the following: Ann Rousseau-Albany, Judith Harris-Bath, Pamela Chester and Debbie Rockefeller-Canandaigua, Debbie Rioux-Syracuse and Lany Mankowski and Fabiane Erb from Western New York. Feel free to contact your facility representatives for answers to your questions and/or concerns.



### What to *Expect*...

✕ IHI Status Report

✕ Treating Patients  
With CARE

✕ Service Recovery

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*We encourage our readers to contact their facility representative related to questions, content or for article submission. The representatives are:*

Albany: Louise O'Neil  
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Syracuse: Debbie Rioux  
WNY: Lizabeth Weiss



# Network 2 Customer Service Council FY99 Accomplishments

By Lizabeth Weiss, WNYHS

Network 2 continues our mission to become a "best practice site" in Customer Service and delivery of healthcare. We are committed to exceptional Customer Service and recognize that providing quality healthcare in a patient focused service delivery system is the key to our survival and future success. The Network 2 Customer Service Council continues to focus on the theme of improving access and quality by creating systems that listen, learn and improve through monitoring and root cause analysis.

In FY99 the Network Customer Service Council accomplishments included:

- A **Retreat** held in October 1998 which identified initiatives for FY 99 and developed specific implementation plans.
- Continued **"Rollup" reports** to measure compliance with performance for the 30-day and 20-minute timeliness standards.
- The implementation of a **Network Clinic Cancellation policy** and quarterly reports on compliance with the standards in the policy.
- The implementation of a **Network Consult Response Time policy** with semi-annual reports.
- **Benchmarking** activities continued in FY99, with site visits to "best practice" local HMOs and to Boston to visit two medical centers and one large outpatient practice. VAWNYHS' participation in the Niagara Health Quality Coalition Picker patient satisfaction surveys. Network Customer Service Council staff presented "Measuring Timeliness of Access to Outpatient Care in the VA Healthcare Network of Upstate New York" at the annual Picker Institute Summer Symposium in Boston in July 1999.
- **Training for providers utilizing Bayer** system was completed in FY99.
- The **Network 2 Customer Service Council Newsletter**, *Exceeding the Expectation*, was produced semi-annually in FY99.
- The survey instruments of various sites of Network 2 were redesigned into the **"Quick Card"** instrument, which was implemented in FY99.
- **Internal Shopper/Peer Consultation** visits were conducted in FY99 throughout Network 2.
- A **"Patient Pager"** program has been implemented throughout Network 2.
- Continued the **Greeter Program** throughout Network 2.
- **Semiannual briefings of the Medical/Dental staff** at each site of Network 2 continued in FY99.
- The Customer Service Council developed a model **"performance standard" for Customer Service for Network 2 staff**. This standard was developed with the leadership of the union partners and Council members.
- A **Network 2 Resource/Experts list** was compiled in FY99 and shared throughout the Network, for quick reference in patient referrals across Network 2.
- **Quarterly reports by the Patient Representatives** were incorporated into the Customer Service Council during FY99. The reports include trending of patient satisfaction issues.
- **Developed and distributed a Customer Service brochure** to all Network 2 staff.
- **Presented a Customer Service training** at Network Volunteer Conference on June 9, 1999 related to the Customer Service standards.
- Network 2 Customer Service Council representatives **participated in the Design Team for the Network's Veterans Service Centers**.
- Network 2's **Website has a Customer Service section**.
- **Implementation of a Reference Library for Customer Service** at each medical center in Network 2.
- **Highlighting Customer Service** initiatives to encourage staff buy-in and continually improve patient satisfaction was done through a variety of means across Network 2: open forums with directors, town meetings, displays of QuickCard comments and other Customer Service information, "notable news" on VISTA sign-on bulletin, holding "fairs" for Customer Service (at Bath and WNYHS), and participation in Network 2 Goalsharing and Public Service Employees Recognition Week events.

# Network Customer Service Plan For FY00

By Debbie Rioux, Syracuse



Network 2 will address customer service improvements with the following action items in the FY00 Tactical Plan:

- **Continue the monthly rollup of performance data by facility in Network 2.** Measure waiting times in areas beyond the 15 specialty clinics done in FY99, for 15 minutes (instead of 20 minutes) and 30-day standards. These will include quarterly clinic cancellation reports across the Network and measurement of compliance with Network Consult Response Time policy (30 days). Information is reported monthly at Network ELC.
- **Direct observation and feedback activities** will take place at each Network 2 medical center site, as well as at a minimum six community based outpatient clinic sites during FY00. Reports of the activities will be shared within Network 2. These activities will include selection of process method from several options including walk through of patient care activities, "mock admission" with mock patient and observer or "Phantom Shopper" where an enrolled patient provides a secret shopper perspective and feedback.
- Continue the **Greeter program** at each site in Network 2. Greeters continue to serve as daily "focus groups" to learn how our veterans and guests experience our facilities.
- **Internal Shopper/Peer Consultation Team** members will visit each site, including all CBOC's in Network 2 in FY00. Use of a standardized report card will facilitate focus on observations and experiences.
- Continue the **semi-annual Customer Service presentations** at each site's Medical/Dental staff meeting to share survey results, best practices and improvement strategies.

- Establish a **Service Recovery/ "Comping" program** at all Network facilities.
- Partner with Education Council to enhance patient education activities, with special focus on visual and interactive learning tools such as videos and Internet. **Develop a video for patient use/orientation** to inpatient care across Network 2 on what to expect of health care team members.
- Partner with Education Council to **develop and implement patient education folder** to be distributed to each enrolled veteran in Network 2's healthcare system.
- Develop and implement placement of **Information Binders** for inpatient units and other selected areas in Network 2 facilities.
- Continue the Inpatient Satisfaction Teams at each medical center in Network 2. Continue **48-hour post discharge surveys** to maintain continuous feedback for rapid cycle improvements. The survey findings reported monthly to Local Network 2 Care Line managers. Develop and implement a quarterly report across the Network.

- Publish semi-annual **"Exceeding the Expectation" Newsletter** to share information on Network 2 Customer Service Initiatives and progress with staff of our Network and others.
- Continue **Bayer training** by offering an annual training session for new providers. This is to maintain the 100% provider participation in Bayer training achieved in FY99.

The Network 2 Customer Service Council listens to feedback from our customers, and then takes action to improve our delivery to them. We continue to utilize "listening posts" and continuous measurement systems, to keep our focus and steadily improve. Our goal is to be the best. In timeliness for example, why should there be **any** waiting time for a scheduled appointment? As we look back, we see significant progress has been made, but great opportunities lie ahead for further improvements. We strive to keep alive a spirit of creativity and innovation and ask "why not?"

**CLIP AND SAVE!**

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# Benchmarking News

By Tom Wisnieski and Pam Chester, Canandaigua

As mentioned in the last newsletter, representatives from VISN 2 facilities visited several "best practice" sites in the Boston, Massachusetts area for the purpose of benchmarking. As a result, the Network 2 Customer Service Council has a team working on development of a videotape that will be able to be used across Network 2 to familiarize veterans with the facilities and services offered across Upstate New York. This video will then be made available for veterans to view during community based outpatient clinic visits, health enrollment fairs and at appropriate marketing outreach activities where veterans unfamiliar with the different facilities may get a preview of what they can expect when planning an admission, elective surgery or a treatment visit.

One of the outcomes from staff attendance at the annual international Picker Symposium held in July 1998, was a presentation for Network 2 staff by nationally known rapid cycle improvement expert, Kathy Luther. Ms. Luther's presentation was videotaped and is available in local Medical Center libraries. In it, she provides many examples of rapid cycle improvement activities that can be implemented in areas where patient care is delivered.

Representatives from the Western New York Health Care system visited the corporate offices of a "best practice" HMO in the Buffalo area. During their benchmarking tour they identified an informational customer service binder which houses answers to commonly asked questions. This is an initiative that we are adopting and are in the process of developing. In Albany, representatives visited two HMO sites. Some of their "best practice features" have been incorporated in the planning for our Veteran Service Centers. Each facility is expected to implement a Veteran Service Center by the end of fiscal year 2000.

In July 1999, Mr. William Feeley, Network 2 Vice President for Customer Service, was a presenter at the Picker Institute's Fifth Annual Symposium, "Through the Patient's Eyes Symposium

Series: Improvement Tools for the New Millennium" Customer Service Symposium held in Boston, Massachusetts. The content of his presentation demonstrated how Network 2 approaches customer service parameters related to access and timeliness. Our measurement system concentrates on three of these standards:

- **You will be seen within 20 minutes of your scheduled appointment (for FY00, this has changed to 15 minutes)**
- **If you are a new patient desiring routine care, you will be scheduled as soon as possible and within 30 days**
- **You will have an appointment with a specialist within 30 days of referral**

WNY Healthcare System has been collaborating with sixteen community hospitals through the Niagara Health Quality Coalition, the Niagara Partnership and Picker Institute. A project, which has been ongoing for the past year, encompasses recently discharged patients from all facilities to obtain the patient's perspective related to how they perceived their hospitalization. This is accomplished through mail out surveys. The focus is on eight dimensions of care that the Picker Institute has determined matters most to patients. These include: respecting a patient's values, preferences and expressed needs, access to care, emotional support, information and education, coordination of care, physical comfort, involvement of family and friends and continuity and transition. These are also reflected in the VA's Customer Service Standards. Lessons learned have included the value of contacting our patients within 48 hours of discharge to hear how they are managing and how well we met their needs and expectations. Each medical center in Network 2 is now conducting post discharge follow-up calls. This new initiative has been met with an overwhelmingly positive response from veterans and their families.

## Veterans Service Centers

By Louise O'Neil, Albany

The concept of "one stop shopping" led to the Network 2 initiative of Veteran Service Centers (VSC). A VSC will be located in each one of our Medical Centers.

The VSC provide services such as enrollment, eligibility, general provider information, referral/authorization status, and general billing information. The Network implementation team is working on standardization of Network 2 literature, materials and position descriptions for staff located in this area. An exciting feature includes incorporation of a software package that will facilitate customer inquiries, analyze workflow to determine staffing requirements, track resolutions, and generate reports.

Staff members will receive training in all functions of the Veteran Service Center. Coaching staff to provide outstanding customer service and building a professional image of the Veteran Service Center will be on going functions of the local VSC Managers at each site. Plans also include having specialists in quality, appeals and training as an integral part of the VSC. A Network Veterans Service Center Manager will oversee implementation and coordination across the Network.

The Centers support customer inquiries, complaints, requests for information and outreach efforts. They provide support to both veterans and providers. The Veterans Service Centers are key elements for improved customer service and satisfaction. Look for one to be implemented in your medical center soon!